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THE THEOLOGY OF THE NEW RATIONALISM

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As the new century has come in there has arisen in the Protestant churches of nearly all the civilized world a movement toward what Sabatier calls "the religion of the spirit." It has met with much opposition and has been stigmatized as "rationalism." This term, as the designation of certain historical movements, and particularly that which arose in Germany about the year 1750, may perhaps be not without its implications of just reproach. That movement was shallow and intellectualistic, did not participate in the great stream of Christian experience which has constituted the life of the church, was unhistorical, without profound conviction or deep emotion, and religiously sterile. The new movement is none of these. To apply to it the old term in the old sense is unjustifiable. But a good term ought not to be given up because it has had bad implications. Rationalism ought to mean a movement governed by reason. Reason is that faculty of man by which he determines truth. It is not divorced from conscience, will, the power of careful observation, or the intuitions. It is the whole man bent upon attaining truth, seeking it, determining it. In this sense, its proper sense, rationalism is a noble term; and the writer proposes to employ it in the present paper because it is the best designation of a movement which in all its forms seeks rational truth. The name, while inviting a brief unpopularity in certain quarters, would powerfully attract to it all more mature and elevated minds. And it might be a powerful influence as a rallying cry for younger men, who have little interest in former theological epochs, and little acquaintance with them, and who most eagerly desire a rational faith.

Rationalism is the antithesis of all systems which depend upon authority as the source of truth. This new rationalism of which I write may be defined, for the sake of absolute clearness in this discussion, as *that form of theology which seeks to perform the theological task of our day—the readjustment of Christian thinking to the demands*

of modern thought—by rational processes alone. It is the product of a large variety of influences, of the prevalence of historical criticism in modern investigation, of the universality of the doctrine of evolution, of the changed view of the universe brought in by the discoveries of science, particularly astronomy; but above all it has arisen from the demand for *truth* which is characteristic of our age, which resolves itself into a demand for *proof* of doctrinal statements. Modern canons of proof are far more rigid than ancient, and this fact would of itself produce a difference in the modern theology from the old. But, very largely, the older theology did not seek proof. There is many a system of theology which announces its task as the setting forth, in dogmatic form, of the contents of the Scriptures, and never raises the question as to the foundation upon which the authority of the Scriptures rests. Such systems give no proof. Many other systems are unconsciously permeated with fallacy because they have regarded their task too easy. They have regarded the system of Christian truth as *given*, once for all, by revelation; and they have understood their task simply as the unfolding and justifying of this system. Many a suggestion has passed muster as a sound argument which could never sustain the test of such an examination as modern thought gives to its premises. Hence men have been driven to a new approach to the subject. In seeking to build up a solid structure of proof from the beginning they have come to the subject of the miraculous, as to which the investigation of nature's laws has given modern thought a much more serious conception than the ancient theology ever had. To the childlike view of former ages a miracle was a very easy matter: to the mature conception of the present day it is a very difficult matter. Modern thinkers see no reason for rejecting miracles today, as claimed, for example, at Lourdes, and accepting the ancient miracles recorded in the Bible. They reject the strictly miraculous everywhere, and with it the whole idea of God's supernatural interference in the course of the world, in favor of the idea of the uniformity of providence as well as of nature. Hence they reject the *authority* of the Scriptures, though not therefore casting the Bible away as of no value. They seek theological facts by the same processes which they employ in any search for facts, and they treat them, when found, by the universal canons of reasoning. Thus

they have arrived at results differing somewhat everywhere, and at some points very widely, from the Christianity of the early creeds. There has arisen thus within the evangelical church a new interpretation of its characteristic life, made by its own sons, who are not conscious of lacking loyalty to it as an organization, or sympathy with its great aims. This is the "rationalism" of which this article treats. It will seek to answer the question what the theology of such a movement, thus arisen, will be.

It should perhaps be noted at greater length, before passing to the direct answer to this question, that the historic forms of rationalism are, many of them, unfavorable to the task of obtaining an estimate of what rationalism really is. Comte, for instance, erected in his *Positive Philosophy* a system of purely rational thought, but not one now thought to be successful. It was a system which had little place for religion. Spencer's great system of *Synthetic Philosophy* was prevailingly materialistic, with the background of an "Unknowable" who was scarcely the object of anything which could be called worship. But the new time is more modern than this. A new recognition of spiritual realities, of psychological facts, partly the fruit of the labors of precisely this Herbert Spencer, has come in. Kidd, who was not a Christian, helped, by his emphasis of the fact that Christianity was "an element of the evolution" of modern society, to give religious facts a new standing before the court of reason. The new rationalism proceeds, therefore, from a different starting-point, and with different materials, to a different result from that reached by earlier rationalists; and therefore it enters at the beginning a *caveat* against confusion of the new with the old.

What, then, is the theology of the new rationalism?

1. The doctrines which precede, in the order of logical development, the doctrine of the Scriptures, will meet with no modification which can be charged to rationalism as such. This portion of theology is, of course, entirely rational in every true system. Does God exist? Is he an infinite person? These questions are the first questions which confront every theologian; and if any theologian can construct a solid argument, fitted to carry the consent of modern thinkers, proving that a personal God exists, he is here a perfect rationalist, and may count on carrying the rationalists with him if he

can carry anybody. The same is true with the doctrine of God's moral attributes, particularly his benevolence, which must be proved before an argument for the Scriptures can be developed, as well as the questions of theodicy and of immortality, of divine causality and human freedom. Rationalism does not influence the discussion unfavorably here, because, strictly taken, it does not influence it at all. But in another sense, it may be said to be favorable to the proof of the existence of God. It rests upon the idea that the world is investigable, that it will be found to be pervaded by law, that it is all orderly and thus good. It thus replaces a mischievous idea which will be found to permeate many a system of theology, that God is an incalculable quantity, to be greatly dreaded, because likely at any moment to smite with terrific power because offended in some unanticipated way. This is a heathen conception, but one above which many theologians have not risen. And, because it indirectly gives greater dignity to the human nature which it so implicitly trusts, rationalism favors the argument for human freedom. But these remarks are incidental. The main point now is that *all* theology, till the divine character and authority of the Scriptures have been proved, is rationalistic.

2. Even the question of the Scriptures, although decided unfavorably by rationalism, is not affected, considered as an argument, by the rationalistic position of any reasoner. The rationalist rejects miracles and special revelation because he does not find a sufficient reason for their introduction into human history. If miracle is necessary to attest, or to convey, a revelation to the original receiver, prophet or evangelist, it is equally necessary to attest it to every other person who receives it. And, then, if truth does not shine by its own light, so as to need no other attestation, it cannot be received, even if attested by miracle; for a man can accept nothing but that which he *sees*. Again, the phenomena of the Bible are unfavorable to the idea that there was a special, miraculous revelation as a matter of fact. Such are the considerations which have led to the rationalistic position; and they are all purely rational arguments, which may be removed by counter considerations open to the acceptor of the Scriptures as possessing divine authority equally with any reasoner. The rationalist differs from his evangelical brother simply in denying the mirac-

ulous origin, infallibility, and binding authority of the Bible. He believes still in its value as the chiefest chapter in the religious history of the race, he recognizes the inspiration of its great teachers as specially taught by God, and especially he recognizes the unique position of Jesus Christ as the founder of the church and the establisher among men of a new relation to God. He will accept the rest of the old doctrine of the Bible as soon as the reasons upon which it is sustained seem to him to be sound. That is the total effect of his rationalism at this point.

3. What may be called the psychological doctrines of Christianity are not essentially affected by rationalism. By "psychological" are here designated the doctrines which deal with matters of immediate consciousness, viz., the doctrines of sin, salvation, and the new life—the "anthropological" doctrines. They are in their main outlines, even in the Scriptures, matters of the transcription of human experience, as for example in the seventh chapter of Romans; and human experience is the same to the modern thinker as to the mediaeval.

It is sometimes said by controversialists that rationalism "has no doctrine of sin." By this is generally meant that the reality, the guilt, and the punishment of sin are neglected if not denied by them. This has doubtless been true of the older rationalism, but it is not of the new. James Martineau preached sin and punishment with dramatic vividness; and R. H. Hutton said of him, "there are passages in his writings which have filled me in moments of temptation and trial with a dread which hardly any living writer could have produced." R. J. Campbell, because, it may be, he has favored the word "blunder" as a description of sin (is not that the meaning of the New Testament *ἁμαρτία*?), has been accused of belittling sin; but those who hear him preach and thus get his doctrine from his own lips have no such impression of his teaching. Sin as transgression of law, as disobedience to conscience, as a multiplying evil, as inevitably punished according to its nature, are matters of immediate consciousness or of direct observation and can be avoided by the rationalist no more than by the theologian of authority. It may be true that certain forms of the doctrine of sin, such as the artificialities of imputation, will be rejected by the rationalist; it might be true that he would pay little attention to a doctrine of original sin founded upon a single verse in an epistle

of Paul; but the solidarity of the human race and the fact of heredity will be found to be more orthodox than most orthodoxy in their implications and consequences for the doctrine of sin. The increasing variety which self-indulgence is assuming in these days, its recklessness, and its growing turpitude, encourage no surmises that rationalism, as a theology founded upon facts, will have a weak doctrine of sin.

As to salvation, the new rationalism is exclusively ethical. It will not recognize salvation as a *state* into which one is brought by the act of a Savior, in consequence of some other transcendental act performed by him, apart from the consciousness of the Christian. It is not something which a man must *believe* that he has, without any evidence but that belief. All this, which belongs to the distortion of evangelical theology, is artificial, external, and unethical. Salvation is communion with God, the "knowledge" of God, as Jesus himself put it (John 17:3). Hence the condition of salvation will remain "repentance," which, in typical cases where a full and permanent communion with the Father is to be established, will become a complete surrender of the whole man to God by sovereign act of his will, which is the conversion or regeneration of which the church speaks. If some psychologists doubt whether any distinct epochal act of surrender to God, or conventional conversion, is necessary to a religious life, none would deny the obvious ethical truth that communion between personalities depends upon mutual sympathy, and that it can take place only so far as sympathy has been established. The personal relation to Jesus Christ, as supreme Teacher and Example, the new rationalism is in no danger of abandoning, since the purest of our historical religious life is that which has kept closest to him, and our ethical ideals have not yet been lifted above him, or even to his level.

Nor is the doctrine of forgiveness, so far as this is a doctrine of consciousness, liable to undergo any essential modification. Forgiveness, as a conscious experience, is harmony of soul, peace of conscience, unhindered communion with God. It is redintegration of friendship with God. Thus great light is shed upon the nature of true human forgiveness, by which the shallowness of most current conceptions of what it is to forgive an offender against ourselves is clearly revealed. You have not forgiven a man till you have made him your friend, and

a better man than he was before. But here is nothing peculiar to rationalism, unless we are to note its escape from subjection to the bondage of what it must regard as some rather unfortunate phraseology of the Bible. Forgiveness does not mean "remission" of penalty.

Nor is the conception of the new life modified by rationalism as such. It still remains "new," for "old things have passed away." It still consists in the steady application to life of the principle of unselfish love. The surrender of the idea of biblical authority may open the way to the criticism of the details of New Testament ethics, as for example, the conception which Paul had of the relations of the sexes (I Cor. 7:5, 9). It will also make the thinker freer in his adjustment of ethical ideals to the exigencies of present-day society. But here no great modification has yet made itself manifest.

4. The eschatological doctrines will undergo less modification than might be expected. The hope of heaven will seem rational still, and the conception of the next life, as one of greater sensitiveness to spiritual realities. With Martineau there was no falling into a denial of future punishment of sin, nor lapse into gross and crude universalism. But, doubtless, something of the apparent clearness of the Christian anticipations of the eternal state may be lost. "Apparent," but perhaps not real, for the biblical views are less clear when subjected to critical scrutiny than they are popularly supposed to be. Most of our ideas are, in fact, the result of our reasoning upon the one general premise of the love of God and the consequent identity of each personality in earth and in heaven. This premise remains still as the basis of reasoning to the rationalist.

5. But what *is* changed is what may be called the scaffolding of the Christian system, the conception of the method by which God and man arrive at the fundamental ethical truths and relations, the Nicene theology, as it is called.

Of this theology, the doctrine of the incarnation is the center. The new rationalism rejects this because, first, it is totally unintelligible, no theologian having yet succeeded in putting any intelligible meaning into the proposition that in Christ are found "two natures, divine and human, each perfect, unmodified, and entire, in the unity of one person;" and, second, if it were intelligible, as a fact to be accepted,

it would rest solely upon the authority of the biblical writers, particularly Paul and John. But neither Paul nor John, while sustaining the general position they do in regard to the miraculous, is a competent witness either to the miraculous in general or to the incarnation in particular. However anyone may support the incarnation by conjecture or supposition, of cogent support in premises capable of giving it anything approaching the nature of a proof, it has none, in the view of modern thought.

Here the greatest shock to Christian sentiment and to Christian practices will be felt. Christian feeling has so gathered about the person of the divine Redeemer with loyal affection, that to adopt any other view of his person will seem to many to be an act of treason. But if it is an act of return to Jesus' conception of himself, and to the truth, it is no treason. Nor is it disloyalty to the truth to demand that it shall be supported by proofs. With the incarnation will also disappear the doctrines of the Trinity and the atonement. The rationalists have often to hear themselves called "unitarians" because they reject the doctrine of the Trinity; but they are not. They regard the unitarian affirmation of the entire simplicity of the nature of God as no less out of place than the trinitarian affirmation of its triplicity. What can finite man know of the inner nature of the infinite? They would prefer to be called by some such name as "infinitarians," because they believe in the infiniteness of God's nature, which opens up the possibility of an infinite number of ways by which he is "qualified for distinct personal action." The atonement, as an eternal divine transaction wrought out upon this planet and having relation to the whole problem of evil in the entire universe, becomes incredible when once the relation of this world to the existing universe is understood, and is to be accepted, if accepted at all, only upon an authority which does not, in the thought of the rationalist, exist. But what if these doctrines are lost? Rationalism has here only carried farther the Protestant correction of Romanism, for it has removed all mediators between the soul and God and given it immediate access to the Father, and has given a truly unmodified and infinite reality to the doctrine of the love of God, which has no concealed remainders of wrath calling for propitiation. Here is change, and radical change made by rationalism; but is it truly destructive? Have we really lost anything?

Is the center of the gospel truly in the crucifixion of Christ as an act or in his perfect communion and moral unity with the Father as the establishment of a new spiritual relation? It is the former if Paul and John spoke with infallible authority; and this is true if their words were attested by miracles; and this is true if miracles are a part of the order of the universe, and are wrought today, say at Lourdes! It is the latter if the new idea of the reign of law is true, if the system of the world is wisely established and needs no mending from time to time, if miracles are now unknown, if men truly learn of God as they learn of the Nature which is his work, by thought, by experience, by slow growth of conception and slower growth of obedient action, in all ages and in all lands, till at last they arrive at the stature of perfect men.

Modern rationalism, however it may differ from "historic" Christianity, is Christian as building its life and its theology upon the fact and idea of communion with God first taught and realized in perfection by Jesus Christ, and as following this unique teacher as its Master and Example. Whatever changes it may have made, or may still make, it believes them all demanded by the call for *proof*, which is the call for *truth* in theology and for *reality* in life.